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# Exploration of the Hamas Suicide Attacks

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**Abstract:** *The majority of the Hamas suicide attacks were carried out by young fellows. There were various motivations for the suicide attacks, including four social factors. Firstly, the miserable experiences of the Palestinian people became a hotbed for the suicide attackers. Secondly, the wide public sympathy of suicide attackers among the Palestinian people provided support for Hamas and the suicide attacks. Thirdly, the Palestinians turned to violence as a last resort from the disappointment of the Palestinian-Israeli peace process. Finally, the Hamas suicide attacks had many religious factors. The Hamas suicide attack has two effects. One is that it causes the Palestinians and Israelis to fall into a vicious circle of "violence to violence"; however it also strengthens Hamas's leading position as a resistant organization. Another is that it has caused the martyrdom culture to become popular in Palestine and inspired many Palestinians to join suicide attacks. In conclusion, the roots of the suicide attacks by Hamas and other Palestinian groups are found in Palestinian despair of the status quo and therefore, the Palestine issue has still not been resolved.*

**Key Words:** *Hamas; Suicide Attack; the Palestinian Issue*

Suicide attacks are one of Hamas' principal means to contend with Israel. Despite their often harsh retaliations, Israel still has not

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been able put a stop to them. Since Hamas's armed wings and activities operate under secrecy, outsiders know little about suicide attack activities, nor about the suicide attackers themselves. This paper will aim to explore this area and reveal the motivations, deeply rooted social causes and the impacts caused by the attacks.

## **Hamas's Suicide Attacks and Its Attackers**

### **1. Hamas's Suicide Attacks**

The suicide attack, among Palestinians and Muslims is referred to as a martyrdom operation, since Islam forbids suicide, in the literal sense of the word (Intihar in Arabic) (Saarnivaara, 2008:242). Hamas considers the suicide attack as a martyrdom operation and weapons of martyrdom (Ateek, 2002:12). The Chinese media often refers to suicide attackers as suicide bombers. In Arabic, a suicide bomber is called 'Istishadi', while Hamas uses the term 'Shahid', corresponding to 'martyr' (Brunner, 2005: 29). The author considers that the "suicide attack or suicide attackers" have no emotional consideration, given to them when mentioned in the media.

In April 1994, in retaliation for the Hebron Massacre carried out by Jewish extremists (Zhu, 2010: 68), Hamas committed its first suicide attack (Saarnivaara, 2008: 246). Between 1993 and 1999, the majority of all suicide attacks (68.4%) were committed by Hamas (Tansey, 2004: 47). Since the Second Intifada broke out in late September 2000, suicide attacks have generally been deployed by Palestinian groups and their numbers have been increasing significantly. From September of 2000 to June of 2006, Hamas conducted a total of 534 incidents and caused 3473 casualties, of which 50 incidents were responsible for 2487 casualties (Clauzet, 2010: 13).

The main targets of Hamas's suicide attacks are Israeli civilians, which they believe are responsible for the Israeli government. For example, Abu Shanab, a Gaza University professor and head of Hamas's political wing, said, "We are in a state of war, and in a state of war all Israeli targets are legitimate (Tansey, 2004: 63)". Late Sheikh

Ahmad Yassin, the spiritual leader of Hamas, said in an interview "The Geneva Convention protects civilians in occupied territories not civilians who are in fact occupiers . . . All of Israel . . . is occupied Palestine. So we're not actually targeting civilians—that would go against Islam" (Tansey, 2004: 56).

As Israel's preventative measures have strengthened, suicide attacks have become more and more difficult. Hamas and other Palestinian groups have begun to deploy short-range missiles and mortars. Only between January and mid-June 2006, 418 Qassams and Katyushas were fired into Israel by Palestinians (Frish, 2006: 865). By the end of 2008, Hamas rocket attacks triggered a massive Israeli retaliation—"Operation Cast Lead". Since then, although Hamas and other Palestinian groups negotiated a cease fire with Israel, the attacks have still happened on occasion.

## 2. Exploration of the Hamas suicide attackers

There is a lack of detailed and systemic information on Hamas's suicide attackers. Some information indicated that more than two thirds of the suicide attackers came from the Gaza Strip (Khashan, 2003: 1056). Hamas once refused to employ female suicide attackers, but have since implemented their first one, whose name was Reem Salah al-Riyashi, in January, 2004 (Brunner, 2005:30). The suicide attackers are largely youngsters. The Hamas political leader Khalid Misha'al once mentioned that 120 people had already given themselves up for the sake of God and the homeland. Half of them were university graduates, and most of the other half were graduates of high school, while only a few had only finished primary schools (Ateek, 2002: 14). In exceptional cases, there are also some elders. For instance, 64-year-old Fatma Omar An-Najar launched a suicide attack on November 22, 2006.

The Palestinian youth make up the majority of the suicide attackers, and Dr. Eyad el-Sarraj explains, "When you are a teenager, you need a hero. And when the father stops being a hero, removed from the home by soldiers or deposed of his public status, somebody else must replace him—the masked people, the activists in the intifada.

These are the leaders, the heroes to follow. And of course you cannot be a leader without a history of confrontations with the military" (Pitcher, 1998:14). In fact, this is related to the self-sacrifice education that Hamas conducted to the Palestinian teenagers at a very early age. Roni Shaked, an Israeli anti-terrorism expert once served in Shin Bet, said, it is impossible to foster a suicide bomber at the age of 22. It begins in the kindergarten, when he grows up to 22, then he begins to look for a change to sacrifice his life. The slogans call to become "martyrs" can be seen everywhere in the Hamas-run kindergartens and schools, which plant seeds of devotion in their hearts.

The recruitment process is also an issue. The Hamas leader Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi claimed that the potential suicide bombers were recruited days before the act was carried out. They had no previous affiliation with Hamas nor virtually any military training. On the other hand, Merari indicated that many of Hamas's suicide cells undergo three weeks to several months of training (Soibelman, 2004: 186). According to the information obtained by the Israeli security agency, the Hamas suicide attackers were only being selected just a few days, sometimes a few hours, before carrying out the action. As preparatory work, they would be taken to a cemetery, lie between the graves for a few hours, wearing a white robe which usually wrapped the corpse of Muslims, in order to feel the taste of death in advance. After that, they would be taken to a secret place to take an oath to claim that they voluntarily joined the suicide attack and their loyalty to Islam. The whole procedure would be recorded and would be broadcasted to the public after their death. In addition, a picture would be taken, so that after their death, they could be hung in public places across the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. For reasons of confidentiality, Hamas forbade the suicide attackers to say good-bye or disclose the contents of the action to their families. Meanwhile, Hamas would have selected the Israeli target, made the bomb and then have found ways to let them sneak into the targeted areas.

3. The Hamas documents after the death of the suicide attackers.

When the Hamas suicide attackers are killed, Hamas publishes three types of documents: (1) A one to-two page ethical will (waṣīyya); (2) two-to-five page biographical description of the martyr's life (sīra); (3) transcript of a eulogy recited at the martyr's funeral. The documents are edited and distributed on a mass scale in the form of leaflets, posters, audio cassettes, video tapes, internet sites, and Arabic TV stations. In the days immediately following the self-immolation of the attacker's death, people who come to the martyr's family are made to watch a videotape showing the martyr reciting his own ethical will. In addition, the ethical wills and biographies are repeatedly cited in Friday sermons and weekly lessons given in mosques (Alshech, 2008: 28).

According to research by the Los Angeles-based American researcher Eli Alshech, the suicide attackers' documents are different in the First Intifada from the Second. Unlike the documents published in the first Intifada, second stage documents were increasingly standardized, simplified, and infused with religious language and content. In the first Intifada each document was unique and personalized, describing various aspects of each attacker's peculiar life. These documents, for example, discuss the deceased's courage and/or unique nature (e.g., "[H]e liked to seclude himself during his childhood, taking refuge in the woods."), his patriotism (e.g., "His primary concern was Jihad and drawing a weapon in the face of the Israeli arrogance that withheld from him the land of his ancestors."), his physical fitness (e.g., "He used to leave the mosque, jogging with other youth after the dawn prayer."), his occupation (e.g., "He pursued various occupations and excelled in trades and in various skills..."), and his piety (e.g., "He used to perform the call to prayer and always recited and memorized the Book of God."). In contrast, second stage documents are increasingly uniform in content, elaborating on identical aspects of the attackers' lives. Only rarely do these documents mention any characteristic or trait that is specific to the martyr discussed in the document. Thus, second stage documents increasingly focus on events that reflect the deceased's religious

devotion and piety, detailing his religious education, attendance at prayers held in the mosque, respect for parents and grandparents, and desire to reach Paradise (Alshech,2008:29-30).

## **The Motivation of the Hamas Suicide Attackers**

The motivation of the Hamas suicide attackers can be specifically divided into the following categories:

### **1. Personal Revenge.**

Many suicide attackers have the unfortunate experience of being devastated by Israel. To take revenge, they embarked upon a road of no return. Fatma Omar An-Najar, who launched the suicide attack on November 22nd, 2006, was among of them. According to the report, she was from Beit Hanoun in the northern part of the Gaza Strip, already at the age of 64. Her husband, who died a year before, served time in Israeli jails, as did five of her seven sons. One of her numerous grandsons died while fighting IDF troops and another teenage grandson lost a leg from gunshot wounds. The misfortune her family suffered filled Fatma with hatred for Israel, thus, concealed from her family that she worked for Hamas. In this case, Hamas agreed to her request to be a suicide attacker. In the video, Fatma Omar An-Najar holding a M16 rifle, read a statement before the Hamas flag: "I am Fatma Omar An-Najar, the martyr from Beit Hanoun. I am working for the al-Qassam Brigades. I am willing to give my life for our nation" (Alshech, 2008: 29-30).

### **2. Religious Devotion**

Religious devotion is usually reflected in the relevant documents of the suicide attackers. The biography of Yāsir Hammād al-Hasanāt (1992), of three-pages devotes two separate half lines to the martyr's wish to enter Paradise (Alshech, 2008: 32). The biography of Mūsā 'Abd al-Qādir Aghnīmāt(1997) of two pages devotes less than one full line to the martyr's aspiration to attain eternal life ("He gave up this world for [attaining] eternal life") (Alshech, 2008: 32).

In the documents of the Second Intifada, Hamas presents Paradise

not as a reward for an otherwise necessary act of self-immolation, but rather as an end unto itself; an independent ideal to which a person must aspire, and which he must pursue. Thus, ethical wills from this period often include statements such as: "This world is a corridor not an abode. Others will state: "Paradise anticipates its beloved ones. Therefore you should not miss the opportunity to meet your Lord" (Alshech, 2008: 33). A will left by Jamal 'Abd al-Ghani al-Nasir, a young Hamas activist from Nablus, dated July 2001 read: "In the name of Allah, the reasons that impelled me to this kind of act are: first, love for Allah and martyrdom; second, love for the al-Aqsa mosque and Palestine and the will to protect them; and third, the will to avenge the blood of the martyrs in times when Arab and Muslim leaders have ceased defending Palestine" (Hatina, 2005:253-254). The ethical will of Suhil Abū Nahīl in 2003, has the following statement attributed to him: "My comfort is that life in this world is short even if it is temporarily prolonged." (Alshech, 2008: 34) The biography of Rāāhid Misk in 2003, asserted that "he frequently uttered, 'O God grant me the martyrdom,' implying that he wished to become a martyr before achieving the doctoral diploma he was pursuing." The research of Eli Alshech also illustrates that, whereas the first stage documents rarely draw upon Islamic religious sources, second stage documents progressively weave into their narratives more Qurānic verses and passages from the Islamic tradition (hadīth) pertaining to martyrs, martyrdom, and jihād. Interestingly, the very same verses and passages appear in most of the second stage documents (e.g., Qurān 2:154; 3:169; 9:14; 9:24). The infusion of second stage documents with religious texts about martyrs and martyrdom, and the choreographing of their content to point out the piety and religiosity of the deceased indicates not only that they were edited or coordinated by a single editor or group of editors, but also that these editors sought to impart a very specific message about martyrdom (Alshech, 2008: 30).

### 3. Retaliation for Israel

Many suicide attacks launched by Hamas are the retaliation against Israeli killing of Palestinians, especially the killing of Hamas



members. The first suicide attack, which was launched by Hamas in April, 1994, was retaliation on the Hebron Massacre made by Jewish extremists. On April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1995, Kamal Kheil, a member of the Hamas military wing, was bombed to death in Gaza. On April 9<sup>th</sup>, Hamas launched two car bomb attacks in Gaza, 8 Israelis were killed, and 45 were injured (Zhu, 2010: 70). On January 5, Hamas's major bomb-maker Yahya Ayyash was killed in Gaza. From February to March, Hamas initiated as many as four suicide attacks (Zhu, 2010: 73).

From mid-2001 to April, 2004, Israel assassinated more than 300 Hamas leaders and other key members (Knudsen: 1386). Hamas vowed to take revenge, carrying out a number of suicide attacks. In a suicide attack that happened in October, 2002, Hamas said it carried it out to avenge an Israeli air raid on Gaza City in July in which 15 civilians were killed, it was also intended as retaliation for an army incursion into the Gaza Strip town of Khan Yunis Monday October 7, in which 17 people were killed, most of them were civilians (Tansey, 2004: 62). After the targeted killing of the Hamas leader Yassin and Rantissi in March and April of 2004, a Hamas official claimed: "Our revenge will come a hundredfold for the blood of Rantissi and Yassin" (Frisch, 2004: 854).

#### 4. Against the Israeli-Palestinian peace process

Hamas is famous for its anti-stance to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and endeavors to make suicide attacks an obstacle to it. While constant progress had been made in the peace process, Hamas launched 4 series of suicide attacks in February and March of 1996. These actions raised the security concerns of the Israeli people, and thus, ultimately influenced the result of the 1996 general election. The hardliner Binyamin Netanyahu, who advocated "security for peace", defeated the moderate Shimon Peres, who advocated "land for peace", by a narrow margin, which directly had an impact on the difficult peace process over the following 3 years. After the Second Intifada, the suicide attacks by Hamas and other Palestinian organizations continued worsening the peace process. As Andrew Kydd and

Barbara F. Walter emphasized, Hamas and Jihad al-Islami (Islamic Jihad), are a means to spoil the prospects of peace negotiations just when they may seem most promising (Frisch, 2004: 846). In a way, the suicide attack serves its purpose.

In addition, Hamas also launches suicide attacks to disrupt the activities that they do not agree with. A Hamas statement claimed that one purpose of the Netanya Park Hotel Passover Seder attack on March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2002 was to derail diplomatic initiatives at an Arab League summit in Beirut (Bloom, 2004: 66). "The summit's resolutions are below the aspirations and the sacrifices of the Palestinian people", said 'Usama Hamdan, a Hamas spokesman in Beirut. Another scholar argues that some young Palestinians have been arrested and put in Israeli prisons and 'concentration' camps, some of them become collaborators. They are ready to become suicide attackers in order to purify and redeem themselves and express their utmost loyalty and patriotism for their country and people (Ateek, 2002:10).

### **The Social Reasons of the Hamas Suicide Attacks**

1. The tragic experiences of the Palestinian people have become a breeding ground for suicide attackers.

After the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and 1967 Six-day War, the Palestinian people lost their national homeland. In addition some became Israeli citizens, and most Palestinian people either became refugees living in other countries, or were forced to accept Israeli rule and occupation. Most of them live in refugee camps with a high rate of unemployment, making their living by working in Israel and other Arab countries. The national humiliation that the Israeli occupation brings is made even more unbearable. The Palestinian scholar Naim Ateek has his detailed description of Palestinians' plight: During the second intifada, the unemployment rate soared to an alarming 75% in some quarters. This led to the fact that approximately 65% of the Palestinian population was living below the poverty line. It has been extremely difficult for many people to find any form of work.

Unemployment creates frustration and despair, and can lead to extreme action. Moreover, it is the young men more than others who are humiliated, harassed, and provoked by the Israeli soldiers. Some of the worst humiliation takes place at checkpoints. The occupied areas have become infested with them. Some reports have mentioned more than 180. The occupied territories have been literally segmented into numerous small cantons where it is impossible to move from one area to another without running into military checkpoints. It takes hours to pass through areas that should normally take only a few minutes. Humiliation is perhaps one of the worst methods used by Israel to dehumanize the Palestinians. Furthermore, there is hardly any Palestinian family in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip that has not experienced some kind of pain or injury. Almost every aspect of Palestinian life is controlled by the Israeli army, and many people have lost the ability to dream of a better future or envisage a better life. Therefore, the desire to avenge their wasted life and take revenge against the occupation runs deep (Ateek, 2002: 9-10).

The sufferings of the Palestinians are related to Israeli rule and occupation, which triggers a strong anti-Israel consciousness. As Naim Ateek pointed out, "the Palestinian young people were not born 'terrorists'. No one is born a terrorist. They were born in the image and likeness of God. They were born human beings with love of life and freedom. All of them, with no exception, were born under the Israeli military occupation. The only Jews they knew were Israeli soldiers carrying guns and dehumanizing them. It was in the crucible of the occupation that they were shaped and formed. And if Israel labels them as terrorists, they are, after all, the product of its own making." (Ateek, 2002: 8).

Palestinians fight for their national rights on the occupied territory (the West Bank and the Gaza Strip), and initiated the First Intifada in 1987 and the Second Intifada in 2000. However, the struggle of the Palestinians encounters harsh Israeli repression, resulting in heavy casualties. From December 1987 to March 1991, 52,107 unarmed residents of the Gaza Strip (population 700,000) were

injured by gunfire, beatings, and tear gas (Pitcher, 1998: 13). Israel also detained Palestinians en masse. There were 1,446 Palestinian detainees in January 2001 to 1,969 the following year; preventive arrests shot up to 2,682 by April 2002 just after the first offensive and to 4,694 by January 2003 (Frisch, 2006: 14).

Israel's violent suppression and severe retaliatory action make Palestinians more radical, and encourage more "martyrs". Just as Mia M. Bloom, a research fellow at the Center for Global Security and Democracy at Rutgers University, term member of the Council on Foreign Relations, and an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Cincinnati, pointed out: "Because of the Sharon government's counter-terror tactics, fewer than 17% of Palestinians are optimistic that the violence will end and peaceful negotiations will resume. Since the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada in September 2000, Israel has stepped up attacks on civilians, militants, the government, and civil infrastructure. Under Sharon's government, Israeli soldiers have bombed Palestinian cities, sent tanks into Palestinian villages, assassinated Palestinian leaders, killed Palestinian youths, demolished Palestinian homes, blockaded Palestinian towns, mined Palestinian fields, and made Arafat a virtual hostage in the West Bank. Most Palestinians view violence as their only option for achieving their goal of independence." (Bloom, 2004: 69). The Hamas leader Rantisi said that acts of self-martyrdom were allowed in response to specific acts of violence from the Israeli camp, acts that frequently have affected innocent civilians. We want to do the same to Israel as they have done to us, it is important for you to understand that we are the victims in this struggle, not the cause of it (Soibelman, 2004: 179).

2. Palestinians' high recognition of suicide attacks provides Hamas attacks with a solid basis of public opinion.

The suicide attack is not unique to Hamas. As early as in the 1980s, Palestinian Islamic Jihad also employed them as a tool in their struggle. In the 1990s, Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad were the main perpetrators of these acts. After the outbreak of the Second Intifada,

Fatah and the Popular Front of Liberation of Palestine launched such action as well.

Palestinians also hold a high recognition of suicide attacks. In fact, in the 1990s, the rate of Palestinians supporting suicide attacks was not high. However, after the outbreak of the Second Intifada, the Palestinian support for suicide attacks rapidly increased. Some sources claimed that between 2000 and 2004 support for suicide attacks was significantly high among Palestinians varying from 60–74%. The highest level of Palestinians' support for suicide attacks was 85% in September 2001 (Saarnivaara, 2008: 429). The Palestinians' strong support for the suicide attacks, makes Hamas's suicide attacks widely recognized, on the other hand, it makes the suicide attacks carried out by Hamas and other Palestinian organizations, have a profound basis of public support, leading to the escalation of suicide attacks.

3. Palestinians are disappointed with the peace process and turn to violence

The formal signing of the Oslo agreement in September 1993 opened the prelude to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Since then, Israel and Palestine have reached a series of peace agreements. During that time Palestinians and the international community have had rather high expectations for the peace process. The peace talks and agreements are in themselves difficult, fulfilling a peace agreement however is even more so. Particularly after the failure of the Camp David summit talks in July 2000, the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks have actually stagnated. By 2002 the PLO controlled only 18% of the occupied territories (mainly cities) and shared control of an additional 22% (mainly villages); the rest was controlled by Israel (Knudsen: 1385). Israel, through the construction of the Jewish settlements, the separation wall and other measures, has continued to erode the land of the Palestinians. The Israeli army has wantonly invaded Palestinian-controlled areas, arrested Palestinians; even the President of Palestinian National Authority Yasser Arafat was besieged at the Presidential Palace and cannot move freely. Ordinary Palestinians, living under the Israeli blockade, corruption and incompetence of the

Palestinian National Authority and Palestinian internal fraction struggles, are still living in dire conditions. In 2003 an estimated three-quarters of the Palestinians lived below the UN poverty line (Knudsen: 1385).

In the past decade, Palestinians have become gradually disappointed with the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, which has stimulated the Palestinians' violent tendencies. During the peace process, the majority of Palestinians did not support suicide attacks, and Hamas's support rate was relatively low. Being disappointed and dissatisfied with reality however, many Palestinians began to identify with radical ideas and the actions of Hamas, which further led to the escalation of Hamas's suicide attacks.

#### 4. Religious factors

As mentioned earlier, some of Hamas's suicide attacks were religiously motivated. Some suicide attackers' courage to sacrifice is related to Hamas's hatred for the Jews and the rivalry situation between Islam and the Jewish religion. In the *Holy Koran*, there are several verses that describe the hostility towards the Jews, and encourage fighting with the Jews and devotion to Islam.

### Conclusion

In summary, although suicide attacks have caused some Israeli casualties, the Palestinian people have suffered more from the retaliations by Israel. This has strengthened the position of Hamas as a leader of the resistance groups. The suicide attacks launched by Hamas and other Palestinian organizations were more or less a reflection of the helplessness of the Palestinian people. Being faced with the strong Israel, Palestinians had no other alternatives in their struggle. As stated in an interview on June 29th, 2002, the leader of Hamas Khaled, said that; 'had the international community done justice to the Palestinians, there would have been no reason for it to resort to martyrdom operations.' He considered these operations as very effective. He mentioned several reasons. The cumulative number

of casualties and losses which Israel cannot continue to sustain; their impact in causing the emigration of Jews out of Israel; the rise of the unemployment rate in Israel and the worsening of its economy; the low morale of its people; but most of all, the fact that the Israeli army does not have a weapon that can match these operations (Ateek, 2002: 14). The Scholar Mia M. Bloom also argued: "Martyrdom reinforces the image of the Palestinians as an oppressed people, since this tactic is the quintessential weapon of the weak", "The Palestinians seek to persuade Israelis that they will pay a high price for the occupation and to force them to pressure their government to withdraw from the Territories and thus end the occupation." (Bloom, 2004: 82).

Although faced with the heavy retaliations of Israel, the suicide attacks conducted by Hamas and the other Palestinian organizations have not been put to a stop. The roots of the situation rely upon the desperation of the Palestinian people faced with their own reality. As Mia M. Bloom puts it: "The period of peace deadlock was closely correlated with an increase in Palestinian unemployment, decreasing per capita gross national product, and economic stagnation, which contributed to a poisoned atmosphere in which suicide bombings became more popular. The poor performance of the Palestinian Authority, the rife corruption of its leadership, and their inability to improve the daily lives of most Palestinians meant that by November 2000, Islamic Jihad and Hamas re-emerged to initiate a new cycle of violence". Even some Israelis also want to improve the situation of the Palestinians in the occupied territories in order to try to curb Hamas's influence. For instance, Nurit Elhanan, a Israeli who lost her daughter in a suicide attack, said: "Hamas take power from the anger of people. If you restored people's dignity, honor and prosperity by ending the occupation, Hamas would lose power." (Ateek, 2002: 17).

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